

So You Want to Go to Mali?

By Stephen Rice



Introduction

Myself, Sue, Chris and Anne recently came back from a four week vacation in Mali and along the way we gained a lot of information about the country. This article is to give you an idea of the best way to see Mali.

Please note that this article is my own personal viewpoint that may or may not be shared by my fellow travellers!

How to Get There

From The Gambia I would suggest there are only two real possibilities for travel to Mali:

1. **Fly to Bamako from Dakar** - This may be the easiest and least aggravating approach. You may want to think about what you want to see: the road to Mali or Mali itself?
2. **Travel to Keyes by road then take the train to Bamako** - The road between Keyes and Bamako is not very good (by all accounts) so the train is the only real option for travel between the two (by land). Getting to Keyes you can go either by train all the way from Dakar (though the better Senegal train is not running so this may not be the most pleasant journey and may take as much as 48 hours based on the amount of time it took us to get from Bamako to Tambacounda) or at any of the other stops along the way (including Tambacounda). Additionally, of course, you can also take a bush taxi or sept-place...

When considering how to get to/from Mali be sure to consider:

- *Do you want to spend a lot of time travelling to/from Mali or do you want to spend the time visiting Mali itself?* The distances are huge and the roads to Mali are generally not that fantastic (nor is the train). There is also not a lot to see on the road in Senegal though after you get to Mali, the scenery tends to get a bit more interesting.
- *How much can you afford?* The plane is expensive while travel by land (with the exception of the train) is relatively inexpensive.

Money

Bring CFA. We were able to exchange Euros at major banks (in the cities) but there aren't many of them around. An advance on credit cards was similarly limited to such banks. Exchange of any other currency (such as sterling) involved the use of (very rare) exchange agents who charged ridiculous rates. US Dollars and traveller's cheques are not worth the hassle to try to get someone to exchange.

As for how much to bring, it would be a good idea to budget for about 15,000 CFA per day that would include a bit of travel and about 10,000 CFA a night for accommodation (more if you are alone). It is more expensive to stay in Bamako and Timbuktu, count on something like 20,000 or 25,000 CFA per day there for food and reasonable accommodation. Reasonable accommodation in Bamako is actually quite difficult though I found "Les Cèdres" quite good and conveniently located.

Obviously the money you spend is largely based upon what you want to do, for example, eating at restaurants will probably cost about 3,000 CFA a meal but if you ate on the street you could probably have a meal for about 500 CFA (though perhaps not with the same selection of dishes). Similarly, whether you are travelling alone or with others may effect the price of accommodation.



View in Ancient Escarpment Village in Pays Dogon

Language

You **SHOULD** know French reasonably well though with the four of us one of us was normally able to figure out what was being said. We found, often purely by chance, that Fula, Mandinka and Wolof were spoken only by a few. English was spoken only rarely.

What to See

Well, there is a lot to see with spectacular scenery to boot. My recommendations would be (in order of preference):

- **Visit "Pays Dogon" (Dogon Country)** - Fantastic villages in stunning scenery. Be aware that if you do any trekking here the walking can be quite tiring particularly the walk up and down the escarpment.
- **Visit Timbuktu** - If you can get there, it is a very small town but has it's own feel (though a LOT of hassle on the streets). Make sure that you plan your return journey **BEFORE** you go there as returning from Timbuktu is difficult (and expensive) though not impossible.

- **Visit Djenné** - Great mosque but an even more interesting town that seems to be lost in time. Market on Monday is OK but not that fantastic with things you would see in any big market such as Serrekunda. Lots of tourists visit on Mondays.



- **Visit Ségou** - If you can stop there, this is a great place (and convenient) to relax before moving on to whatever else you have planned for your visit. I would strongly recommend the Djouliba Hotel as a great place (and very reasonable prices, the "terrace" is quite pleasant and cheap) to spend your nights. There is not a lot to see here though the market is quite good as is the pottery market. You can also take the public pinasses across to a local Bozo village (or take one of the bumsters up on their offer of a private hire...) to see that but we never had the opportunity to do this (and we had seen a LOT of villages by then).
- **Visit Hombori** (if you can) - A very unique place with the main village at the bottom of a small mountain with the older portion (still inhabited) a rather interesting short walk up the mountain. Spectacular scenery but a bit of a distance away from anything though on the road back from Gao (or a short distance from Douentza). If you do visit I would strongly recommend staying at the "Auberge" (just a short distance from the road -- follow the signs) which has basic but clean facilities (including immaculate open-roofed showers and toilets) at a reasonable price.



Volunteers Relaxing in Hombori

Disappointments

There were a few things I found a bit disappointing with our visit. These would have to include:

- **The walk to "Point G" in Bamako** - The walk is VERY VERY long and while you get good views of the city, if you want those, visit the Presidential Palace or take a bush taxi to the top instead. Ok, nice views of the city from the top, but a two hour walk for this?
- **Bandiagara** - There is NOTHING really to see here (which is used as the entrance to Pays Dogon) and there is hassle on the streets by guides wanting to offer their services so I would suggest you spend only the necessary amount of time here.
- **The Monday Market in Djenné** - If you have seen a few big markets in Africa you have seen this one as well. Nothing particularly special about it. But, if you do happen to be in the area on a Monday, of course, do go to see it...Just I would not suggest going out of your way.
- **Bamako** - Again, not much to see, expensive, crowded, noisy, and very polluted. Then again, it does have a good market and the museum is supposed to be very good as well (though a lot more expensive than the guidebooks indicate).

Obviously, everything is relative and this is only based upon our experiences while we were there.

How to Get Around

We found that transport by bus was a great way to get around. The buses generally were in much better condition than GPTC, ran to a reasonable schedule and were not too expensive. You do need to check schedules though and purchase your tickets in advance (most of the time, simply on the day of travel). Keep in mind that sometimes the buses will stop at stations well outside of the city they are supposed to stop at (going to Djenné by bus put us at a junction at least 30 km from the city where we then had to catch a "bashee" to Djenné itself).

The boat trip from Mopti (or other ports along the river) to Timbuktu is another option but is quite slow and it may be a bit of hassle to arrange.

Whenever you get somewhere it is a good idea to figure out in advance the details on how to move on from where you are: Get the bus schedule, buy your tickets, or whatever. You don't want to find out a few days later that the only bus out of the town for the week left the day before.

How Long to Spend

Transport around the country will take time, count on no less than two weeks to do any amount of sightseeing. We found that in four weeks we were able to take in a number of the sites including taking the boat from Mopti to Timbuktu though with another week we could have...

Obviously the amount of time you will be able to spend in Mali is also dependant upon how you chose to get there as well as how much you can afford.

When to Travel

Interesting point. We travelled during the rainy season that is supposed to be the hottest time of the year but we did find the countryside wonderfully green and lush. It was very hot though. The bulk of the tourists visit during the "winter" months (November to March) when you can be assured that the bumsters will be out in full-force. Which brings us to...

Hassle Evaluation

We had bumsters bothering us pretty much everywhere though they were more persistent and aggravating in some places than others. I found Timbuktu had the most persistent hassle with people offering to sell you Tuareg gifts and following you pretty much everywhere with "no" not seeming to have too much of an effect. One time we were walking away saying "no" over and over again as the man dropped his price more and more (obviously we were the "hard sell") following us quite a distance

down the street. I swear he went down to about 25% of what he originally wanted! If he had followed us further...10%?

To be honest though, the hassle we experienced in Mali was pretty similar to what we here in The Gambia might face visiting the Senegambia strip or Bakau. If you can deal with the hassle here you will be able to deal with it in Mali.

Conclusion

Mali is a tremendous country and worth the effort if you want to visit. It does pay to put a bit of work into researching what there is to see and how you can actually see it. I hope that the information I have presented here may be of some use.

Keep an eye on my web site for further information at <http://www.stevedrice.net/mali>

